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ABSTRACT

A study examined the demographic and family process characteristics of 116 academically successful, low income, urban, African American adolescents, focusing on factors supporting the students' relative success. A principle focus of the study was students' perceptions of their parents' role in their success. The study examined whether parents used an authoritative parenting style, as the literature shows adolescents from authoritative homes score higher on measures of psychosocial development and mental health. Students commented on family process characteristics of emotional closeness, parental involvement, and family decision making. Findings indicated that the overall parent-child relationship was characterized by high levels of emotional closeness, with greater closeness and interaction with mothers than fathers. Parents were described as highly involved in decision making, actively communicating, actively monitoring behavior, and participating in discussions on issues of concern. When fathers were present, students' grades tended to be higher. Parents were not found to be authoritarian but highly involved, warm and supportive, yet not encouraging of psychological autonomy. The findings challenge previous characterizations of low-income, urban minority families. Results also suggest that workshops aimed at assisting parents with limit setting and at helping families increase communication and warmth are potentially beneficial. (Contains four references.) (JPB)

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Introduction

The main goal of my research was to explore and describe basic demographic and family process characteristics of a sample of academically successful, low-income, urban, African-American adolescents. Rather than focus on deficiencies, I sought to uncover trends that might be supporting the scholars' relative success.

Another goal of this study was to explore the extent to which the scholars describe their parents as using an authoritative parenting style. Reviews of the literature on parenting styles have come to the conclusion that adolescents from authoritative homes score higher on measures of psychosocial development and mental health, regardless of how those measures are defined, than adolescents from homes where other parenting styles are employed.

One of the most often cited studies examining the effects of the authoritative parenting style across a wide range of ethnic groups was conducted by Steinberg, Mounts, Lambourn and Dornbusch. In this study, the conclusion was drawn that, "the widely reported positive correlations between parental authoritativeness and adolescent adjustment appears to transcend ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and family structure." Pg 30. However, the comparison was made between two categories of parenting style--authoritative and nonauthoritative—rather than comparing among four categories.

Findings of an earlier study by Dornbush and colleagues on the effects of parenting style and school achievement across different ethnic groups showed that when the sample was disaggregated into homogenous racial groups, the authoritative style was only significantly predictive of higher grades among white adolescents. The authoritarian style was negatively predictive of grades among white and Asian students, but not among African-American or Hispanic males.

As a result of these and other findings, the authoritative parenting style has taken on positive developmental connotations while the authoritarian, indifferent, and indulgent parenting styles have taken on negative connotations without regard to the potential benefits that can come from having parents who are more controlling.

However, much of this body of work on the benefits of authoritative parenting has been conducted on white, middle-class, 2-parent samples that have operationalized positive developmental outcomes based on a definition of what it is to be successful in the white, middle-class culture. Considering that the conceptualization of a positive developmental outcome is based on a definition that emphasizes instrumental competency—perhaps at the expense of expressive competency, there is a need to look at other populations to determine if the authoritative parenting style accurately predicts competency. Perhaps the ideals of individualism, self-reliance, and autonomy are not the same goals many cultural and ethnic groupings use to guide their socialization practices.

For many African-Americans, such socialization practices are not desirable. For example, it is maintained that emotional distancing from one's parents plays a central role in the development of a well-differentiated and individuated sense of self. Such premises are based on ideals of rugged individualism and self-determination that have long been the benchmarks of a white middle-class America. However, as much of the discourse on ecological validity and cultural relativity argue, many minority and ethnic groupings do not aspire to those same ideals. More specifically, many African-Americans base their values and ideology on a history and heritage that emphasizes group loyalty through consanguine ties and strong kinship networks.

In my time with you today, I will present the demographics and important findings, and then discuss the implications for family processes.

Demographic Characteristics

First, I would like to briefly describe the demographic characteristics of my sample. In total, 116 scholars completed the questionnaire. Fifty-seven percent were about to enter the 11 grade and 43% were about to enter the 12 grade. Their average age was 16 and they maintained a B+ grade point average. Thirty-nine were male and 77 were female. Six of the females and none of the males reported living with their own child. (Although no male reported living with their child, they may have fathered one, but the mother assumed primary responsibility for its care. Looking back, we should have asked for more specific information on this topic.) Collectively, 32% lived in a two-parent household. Males were almost twice as likely as females to live with their father or step-father. In a typical home you would find four to five people—a single-mother, the scholar and two siblings, and in about one-third of the cases, a dad. In 25% of the homes, you would also find grandparents and/or other relatives living there. An average scholar had encountered three stressful life events in the previous two years, and their annual household income was slightly less than $15,000.

The sample differs from the typical social science depiction of African-American youth. The scholars are high academic achievers, maintaining a B+ grade point average. Fewer scholars have become pregnant (8% vs. 38%), they live in larger households, have more siblings, have encountered fewer life-events stressors, and if male are more likely to live with two parents than the national averages for African-Americans.

Family Process Characteristics

Now, I will share my findings on the family process characteristics in the following order: emotional closeness, parental involvement, and family decision making. The overall parent-child affective relationship is characterized by high levels of emotional closeness. I found no significant

differences between males and females on their ratings of closeness to their parents. However, the scholars reported feeling more emotionally close to their mothers than to their fathers, which is often the case in youth from mother-only families. This dimension of parent-child emotional closeness is consistent with previous research on African-American adolescents, and is perhaps an outgrowth of the communal orientation and interdependency of relatives on each other for expressive and instrumental support that is present in many African-American communities. The scholars may also wish to maintain close affective ties to their parents, especially when confronted with a peer culture that devalues academic success. Being firmly anchored in the protective emotional harbor their parents provide appears to be an adaptive pattern of behavior.

In terms of parent-child interactions, the scholars reported talking to their mothers fairly often and significantly less often with their fathers. Sixty percent of the scholars reported that their parents made controlling demands on a regular basis. Forty percent reported that they were rarely or never limited on the amount of time they could spend with friends, required to do household chores, or checked on to see if they had completed their homework.

Looking at patterns of family decision making, the majority of scholars reported a pattern that is tipped in the balance of higher parental control than in favor of adolescent autonomy. Ninety percent of the scholars reported that they do not make decisions entirely on their own—8% said their parents decide by themselves, 41% said their parents talk with them first and then make the decision, and 41% said their parents talk with them and then they all decide together. Only 8% of the scholars reported that they decide by themselves after having discussed the issue with their parents.

Overall, the scholars describe their parents as highly involved in decision making, actively communicating, actively monitoring their behavior, and participating in discussions about many

issues that concern them. I find this encouraging as much of the research literature talks at length about the diminished capacity for supportive and involved parenting among low-income, uneducated, urban, and, often, single parents.

One of the more intriguing findings of this investigation is the absence of statistically significant gender differences. In contrast with previous studies which have reported significant gender differences with regards to perceptions of parent-child affect, parental-involvement, and parent-child interaction, my study failed to demonstrate significant main effects for gender on these family process variables. So, it appears that among academically successful youth, males and females have very similar perceptions of their parents' parenting strategies.

When I looked at the number of people in the household, I found that as the number of people living under one roof increased, perceptions of mother-child affect and parental involvement decreased, while perceptions of father-child interaction, participation in family decision making, and grade point average increased. It appears that as the number of children increases, parents must spread their limited energies more sparsely, resulting in diminished degrees of parental involvement, less emotionally available mothers, and greater responsibility being placed on the adolescent to make his or her own decisions. An increase in household density is often the result of the father's presence. The data suggest that when fathers are present, scholars' grades are higher, closer to A than to B+ averages.

One possible explanation for this phenomenon of increased grade point average in father present families may be attributed to decreased inter-parental conflict over finances, increased father involvement with schooling, and more harmonious family interactions. This explanation is supported by the 1995 finding of Brody and colleagues who reported that in a sample of 90 rural African-American families, greater financial resources were associated with more supportive and

harmonious family interactions and with lower levels of inter-parental conflict which were in turn linked directly to academic competence.

Entering all of the family process variables into a regression equation revealed that only the amount of interaction the scholars had with their fathers was predictive of their emotional closeness to him, and that only the adolescents' perceptions of parental intrusiveness were predictive of their emotional closeness to their mothers. It seems then, that with increased opportunity for conversation comes increased feelings of emotional closeness. The ability of parental intrusiveness to be predictive of mother-child affect is more puzzling. Why would adolescents feel more emotionally close to a controlling, nagging mother than to a cool mom who lets them do their own thing? Perhaps the perilous conditions of the scholars' urban environments and the lack of adult involvement in many of their peers' families, lead the scholars to perceive their mother's increased monitoring as an expression of positive affect—greater concern for their well-being is equated with higher levels of emotional closeness.

Parenting Style

Although not designed to specifically assess parenting style per se, the measures used to assess parental intrusiveness, family decision making, parent-child affect and parent-child interaction do tap the dimensions of demandingness, monitoring, psychological autonomy, warmth and support. The picture that emerged is of a parenting style high on all three dimensions of demandingness, warmth, and support. The scholars describe their parents as more warm and supportive than the authoritarian parent, yet also less encouraging of independent decision making than an authoritative parent. Even though the scholars have less autonomy and higher parental monitoring than one would expect for their age, they also report higher levels of warmth. This combination of characteristics does not seem to be interfering with the scholars ability to develop

competently and positively. It may be possible that these adolescents are describing a parenting style that has been custom tailored to meet the demands of the environment and culture in which they live.

The scholars' parents are neither authoritarian (high demandingness, high monitoring, low warmth) nor authoritative (high demandingness, high warmth, encouraging of independent decision making). Instead, the scholars characterize their parents as highly involved, very warm and supportive, yet not encouraging of psychological autonomy. Perhaps this constellation of parenting practices and behaviors should be called *communitarian*, reflecting the socialization goals of a more communal ethnic group. Such a conceptualization focuses attention on the role kinship and consanguine ties play in African-American socialization—high value placed on loyalty to family ties, less preoccupation with the socialization of highly individuated and differentiated offspring.

To illustrate, in a 1988 study, Willie found that a strong sense of collectivism (vs. individualism), communalism (vs. autonomy), and a general sense of "stick-togetherness" is both a characteristic of, as well as a necessity to African-American culture. These traits have been very functional in terms of helping marginalized communities survive decades of systematic oppression.

Implications

Before I discuss the implications of these findings, I would like to introduce a cautionary footnote. We asked older high school students who have been successful in school and targeted as scholars to describe aspects of their parents' parenting behavior. It is possible that the scholars' success has evoked more involved parenting. It is also possible that more involved parenting has lead to successful adolescents. Even though, I am not able to comment on direction or causality, I

do maintain, however, that there is no refuting that the more involved the parent, the closer the scholar feels to them.

The findings of this study suggest that much can be learned from looking at the positives in a population of successful families. We see that parent-child communication, parental involvement, parental monitoring, support and encouragement are all part of a system that works. The message seems clear. As researchers and practitioners, we need to communicate that parents should not be afraid of losing a child's love because they actively impose limits and ask questions. Programs could be developed that help parents increase and improve communication with their children, that empower parents to set limits, and that foster and encourage parental involvement in the schools.

Partnering with families to accomplish this task requires us to focus our attention on their complete set of life circumstances, addressing the component parts of issues within the larger context from which they came. It also requires us to look for and build on assets—what is right, what is working, what is functional and adaptive for their unique life circumstances and sociocultural contexts.

The finding that the scholars describe their parents as neither authoritative nor authoritarian makes me stop to consider, have I unintentionally lead adaptively controlling parents to loosen their controls simply for the sake of helping them become more authoritative? As we seek to build relevant theories of child development, we need to be careful not to get stuck in using our familiar, Western-European normed theories as the framing base upon which we seek to make meaning of the phenomena we uncover. Nor as practitioners should we use materials or prescribe practices that should work, simply because they work for the middle class. However there is a dilemma inherent in this. How do we go about being culturally sensitive without being

hindered in our attempts to improve the life conditions of those we attempt to reach? Which values and behaviors do we avoid because adoption of such practices may be imposing and disruptive and which ones do we actively communicate because we believe they are linked to success?

Conclusion

In conclusion, I believe we are faced with opportunity and challenge to meet those we work with in their blocks, barrios, neighborhoods, and communities to develop culturally relevant instruments and interventions. The results of this study strongly suggest that workshops aimed at assisting parents with limit setting and at helping families increase communication and warmth are potentially very beneficial. However, in the process of designing and implementing such involvement workshops, we may discover that before parents can feel empowered to set limits and be emotionally available for their children, they need help feeling more in control of their own lives. Then, what is really needed is not an intervention on communication or limit setting, but one that helps parents and adolescents deal with the daily stresses of life, that is perhaps then followed by one-on-one help with goal setting and financial planning. This later proposition means that we, as helping professionals, need to be aware of as well as able to reach out to, others in the community who have the necessary background, materials, and legitimacy to help achieve the goal.

The findings of this study are a beginning description of non-deviant, academically successful, urban, African-American adolescents. They challenge some of our previous characterizations of low-income, urban minority families. The results reinforce our understanding of the important role actively engaged parents play in contributing to the success of their children

And serve as a reminder that as researchers and practitioners we must carefully evaluate the underlying assumptions and values of the theories and hypotheses we use to guide our work.

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